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ABSTRACT

Communicative proficiency, defined as native-like ability to use the language as a medium of two-way communication, is most effectively and efficiently achieved through instruction emphasizing development of listening and reading comprehension skills, and virtually excluding training in production. The comprehension approach avoids the teaching of explicit linguistic knowledge, and recreates the supportive and relaxed atmosphere of the native language acquirer, focusing solely on the development of comprehension skills. Traditional language classroom practices are replaced by a highly permissive acceptance of any output. The success of this approach has been linked to the teacher's ability to devise instructional materials that are interesting and appropriate to the learner. Full productive language ability then develops as an automatic by-product of the development of fluent comprehension processes through exposure to high-quality input that is presented in comprehensible contexts. The success of the comprehension approach is explained by a theory of language processing which makes a clear separation among the components of language ability while emphasizing the ways in which these components interact in the ongoing comprehension, production, and acquisition of language. (MSE)

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Communicative Proficiency Through Comprehension

H. Stephen Straight

The present paper will address the question of how to achieve just one of the two goals of language instruction that are included in our conference title. Specifically, it focuses on the issue of what instructional methods to use in order to foster the highest possible level of communicative proficiency in language acquirers, where communicative proficiency is defined as native-like ability to use the language as a medium of two-way communication. The paradoxical answer to this quetion is that communicative proficiency is most effectively and efficiently achieved by means of instruction that emphasizes the development of comprehension skills (listening and reading) to the virtual exclusion of training in production.

However, before presenting the details of this heretical answer, and defending it in terms of some equally heretical theoretical psycholinguistic ideas, it is essential to discuss some of the ways in which the achievement of communicative proficiency relates to the achievement of other different but valid instructional goals, including the goal of cross-cultural understanding mentioned in our conference title. It turns out that a good deal of the controversy that surrounds the "comprehension approach" recommended in this paper is due to the multiplicity of goals of most language instruction. Because the comprehension approach focuses exclusively on the development of native-like communicative proficiency, it fails to address any of these other goals. Recognition of these other, often unacknowledged, goals is required if we are to develop an instructional program appropriate to meet them.

A brief review of the variety of goals in language teaching should persuade you that a variety of different instructional approaches is probably required, each directed toward a different goal or set of goals. It may also persuade you that, except insofar as these various possible goals conflict, an instructional scheme that hopes to achieve a combination of goals will have to include a variety of different approaches in an eclectic but integrated manner.

Instrumental versus Intellectual Goals in Language Teaching

Communicative proficiency and cross-cultural understanding are good examples of the two basic categories of goals typically pursued in language

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instruction. In the case of communicative proficiency, the goal of language instruction is to develop the full range of language skills of the imagined typical fluent native listener-speaker. As demonstrated by Professor Ramirez in his contribution to this volume, such proficiency deserves far more than the simple "four skills" description traditionally recognized in language instruction. Nevertheless, even full communicative proficiency is limited to just those aspects of language skill that enable a person to use a language for interpersonal communication. These skills thus all fall into the category of what I will here call the instrumental goals of language teaching.

Cross-cultural understanding, on the other hand, is a very different sort of goal. On one interpretation of the phrase, which appears to be the interpretation of the organizer and contributors to the second session of the present conference, this goal puts less emphasis on the development of practical skill in using the language than on the development of reflective appreciation of the ways in which the language reveals and explicates a wide range of cultural characteristics of the people who use it. This sort of conscious knowledge plays no necessary role in the use of the language in communication: indeed, even native listener-speakers of the language may not have any awareness of the ways in which their language embodies beliefs and attitudes that are specific to their particular cultural group. When teachers seek to bring these insights to the attention of language-acquirers, they are furthering what I will here call the intellectual goals of language teaching.

Communicative proficiency and cross-cultural understanding are good examples of instrumental and intellectual goals of language teaching, but they are by no means the only such examples.

Examples of Instrumental Goals Other Than Communicative Proficiency

The typical but very ambitions instrumental goal of full native-like communicative proficiency has recently been recognized to be dividable into a large number of more specific sub-goals. Many acquirers have rather limited "specific" or "special" purposes for which they intend to use a new language, and these more limited purposes can guide the selection of teaching materials and methods so as to ensure that the acquirers will acquire the communicative skills they really need (Mackay & Mountford, 1978; Mackay & Palmer, 1981; Munby, 1978; Wilkins, 1974). It should be noted, though, that the desired

endpoint of specific-purpose instruction is still the achievement of fluent communicative skill, but in only a limited arena of verbal interaction.

In extreme cases, the goals of an acquirer may not even be described as those of "proficiency" or "fluency." They are instead sub-fluent instrumental goals. For example, many acquirers have no loftier goal in mind than simply to get along in the language for a brief period, such as during a visit to Paris or Madrid. In this case, rather than speaking a few dozen highly fluent and very correct utterances it might be better for such acquirers to speak the language in the very roughest of "pidginized" versions, sufficient to satisfy their various but rather limited needs. Clear signs of their marginal language ability might even be intentionally introduced and maintained in their speech in order to keep fluent listener-speakers from jumping to false conclusions about the extent of their communicative capabilities. Despite the fact that the majority of college-level students who attain any usable production ability at all attain a level describable as pidgin, I don't know of anyone who has said that this is what foreign language instruction is supposed to achieve. Explicit recognition of this limited goal would surely lead to the adoption of radically different instructional materials and methods.

Another sub-fluent instrumental goal, however, plays a powerful and very explicit role in shaping most language instruction: acquirers are expected to speak the language as soon as possible. When people hear that you're studying Russian, they will expect you to be able to "say something in Russian." And when you have something you want to say in the new language, you want very much to know how to say it. The "Community Language Learning" approach of Curran (1961), for example, builds its counseling-learning schemes around the high motivation acquirers have to express themselves. Teachers, too, typically put a high premium on early production skills. When they teach acquirers new forms of the language, they want to be able to use production tasks as measures of the success of that teaching. And when they speak to acquirers in the language they would prefer responses in kind rather than responses in the acquirers' native language or only nonverbal responses.

To be sure, both acquirers and teachers quickly realize that they must accept a prolonged period of severe limitation in emerging production

fluency. But the typical early emphasis on memorized dialogues, rote phrases, and vocabulary lists can be attributed very largely to the power of this instrumental goal of early production skill. This bias toward production results from a number of mistaken beliefs about the nature of language and language acquisition (Straight, 1976, 1978, 1982), but these beliefs are so deep-seated that their repercussions on language instruction have to be reckoned with regardless of what language-acquisition theory one espouses.

Most examples of instrumental goals other than communicative fluency constitute reductions from that goal. In some cases, however, the instrumental goals of language acquirers, or of language teachers, are supra-fluent. That is, they go beyond mere communicative fluency to encompass such things as sequential or simultaneous translation, or creative writing. There is nothing wrong with these goals, of course, but it is important to realize that they presuppose and are over and above the basic instrumental goal of communicative proficiency. Translation and story-writing are not things that come automatically with communicative proficiency, nor should they be used as measures of the relative communictive proficiency achieved by acquirers.

Examples of Intellectual Goals Other Than Cross-Cultural Understanding

In some cases the intellectual goals of language instruction depend upon the attainment of a high level of instrumental skills. Goals of this type include such things as literary criticism or historical research and encompass all the many humanistic and scientific pursuits that require an ability to understand ideas expressed in the new language and to articulate one's opinions or findings in that language. Although their appearance in the "FL" curriculum is typically limited to "Lit[erature] and Civ[ilization]," these intellectual goals, in principle, run the full range of the goals of education that one pursues through the medium of one's native language. And the means of meeting these goals fully coincide with the means that one might use to meet them in the native-language context. Here we find the problems of the "language teacher" to be little different from those of the teacher in general, who also must provide students with appropriate vocabulary and background knowledge. I'll call this category of intellectual goals supra-instrumental.

Other intellectual goals are more specific to language teaching, however, and can even be pursued in the absence of instrumental goals. The most obvious of these intellectual goals in most current language instruction is the inclusion of a wide range of analytical observations about the language being taught. Acquirers are told a lot about such things as consonants and vowels, or nouns, verbs, and adjectives, or subjects and predicates, and they are often told to memorize pronunciation rules, declensions, and syntactic formulas. They may also be taught things about the history of the language or about its current dialectal variants. I'll call this sub-category of intellectual goals linguistic.

Unfortunately, none of this has been demonstrated to contribute to the achievement of communicative proficiency, though most acquirers expect to learn such things and virtually all teachers expect to teach them. This hardy vestige of the outmoded "grammar-translation" method of language instruction is particularly robust in college-level contexts, but it is a virtually universal component of instruction, despite the fact that its only known effects on communicative proficiency are negative (see Krashen, 1972b).

The use of such conscious knowledge can of course help an acquirer to perform the various senseless and artificial tasks that are typically used to gauge language ability. Ironcially, then, many of the acquirers who do "best" in current language instruction may actually be superior not in acquiring communicative skills in the language but rather in learning <u>about</u> the language. Moreover, the conscious monitor they employ in language performance (Krashen, 1977) is actually a source of self-conscious disfluencies that do not appear in the performance of acquirers with less aptitude for intellectual-linguistic tasks (Krashen, 1978). After all, native listener-speakers differ radically in their aptitude in this area with little correlation to their degree of communicative proficiency. Acquirers and teachers are nevertheless committed to the proposition that explicit attention to "grammar" is an essential component of language instruction.

The third broad sub-category of intellectual goals, after supra-instrumental and linguistic, can be called cultural. It is here that we find the goal of cross-cultural understanding, which is implicit in the presentation of any and all items of information about the history and habits

of the people who speak the language being taught. Cultural intellectual goals rank high among the reasons usually given for the inclusion of foreign language instruction in general education curricula, and textbooks invariably include tidbits of cultural content, whether quaint or modern, mundane or grand. And advanced instruction of the supra-instrumental variety is often seen as a continuation from this early cultural intellectual goal of language instruction.

Both linguistic and cultural aspects of languge study are valued for the insight they give acquirers into the nature and extent of the things that differentiate them from the members of a language group other than their own. Such insight is typically held to be an automatic by-product of exposure to a description and examples of the language and culture involved, whether or not such exposure is reinforced by specific cross-linguistic or cross-cultural comparison. Explicit cross-cultural comparison, however, is also widely used to a further purpose: it can provide a provocative basis for the communicative interaction between acquirer and teacher that is essential to the development of communicative fluency.

In the case of a purely intellective program of instruction, however, no expectation of the achievement of communicative fluency need be made. While the instrumental goals of language teaching demand a focus upon the establishment of the subconscious processes of language perception and production, the intellective goals can be met without teaching such skills. The accumulation of conscious items of fact and theory concerning the language or the people who use it could obviously be achieved in a class in linguistics or history without any intention of developing an ability to use the language. In fact, there is considerable reason to doubt that most such non-instrumental goals are best served in the context of an instrumentally-oriented language class (see Straight, in press, for further discussion of how best to achieve non-instrumental goals).

Combining Goals

As long as the goals selected do not conflict with each other, a single language instruction method may freely combine goals from among the set identified here (see accompanying table). Thus one may combine any number of different "specific-purpose" modules in a method designed to result in full

communicative fluency. After all, any method requires the seclection of topics and materials to which the acquirer is to be exposed, and the specific practical purposes of the acquirers can easily serve as the basis for such selection. One is similarly free to combine cultural intellectual goals with any and all instrumental goals by means of judicious selection of teaching materials. The only danger here is that fascination with the content of such materials may so distract the acquirers that they proceed to discuss it in their native language when they ought to be receiving increasingly more sophisticated input.

Goals of Language Instruction

INSTRUMENTAL	INTELLECTUAL
Fluent "Communicative Proficiency" "Specific-Purpose"	Supra-Instrumental Literary Criticism, History, Science, etc.
Sub-Fluent "Pidginized" "Early Production"	Linguistic Phonetics, Philology, Grammar, Dialectology, etc.
Supra-Fluent Translation, Creative Writing, etc.	Cultural Daily Life, Mores, "Cross- Cultural Understanding"

Unfortunately, many of the goals do conflict, in the sense that efforts to meet one of them may work against the efforts appropriate to meeting another. This has long been recognized, for example, for translation ability. If initial language instruction emphasizes translation between the native language and the language being acquired, the acquirer is likely to construct a word-for-word pattern of correspondances between the two languages. The sort of "compound bilingualism" (Weinreich (1953) that results from such a forced merger of the two languages prevents the acquirer from achieving accurate understanding or expression in the new language and, of course, precludes accurate translation. For this reason, the development of translation skill can only occur <u>after</u> the development of rich receptive and expressive skills in the languages involved. A similar postponement is necessary for creative writing and other instrumental goals that depend upon full communicative fluency for their development.

Other less obvious examples of conflict emerge only after one has looked closely at the question of what methods are most appropriate for language instruction of various sorts. The two major sources of such conflict have already been alluded to, but I will mention them again here. First, the presentation of linguistic analytic units and principles ("grammar") is now widely (though not universally) recognized to be detrimental to the development of native-like communicative fluency. It appears that to the extent acquirers may be encouraged to employ consciously known "facts" about the language as a basis for understanding or producing utterances in it, to that same extent their performance as listener-speakers will be artificial. Explicit learning of pronunciation and grammar has not been demonstrated to be either necessary or effective in the development of fluent listening or speaking (Krashen, 1981b).

Second, an early emphasis on production, whether written or oral, has also been discredited by recent research, both basic and applied. This research will be outlined in the next section of this paper, but it should be mentioned here that acquirers' expectations regarding early speaking and teachers' practical and traditional desire that they do so are clearly the greatest obstacles to the adoption of a teaching methodology that would lead to the best acquisition outcomes in both listening and speaking skills. Furthermore, the specific-purposes goals mentioned earlier can also come into conflict with general proficiency training on this point: if the specific-purpose domain is one that the acquirer must be able to function in both receptively and expressively as soon as possible, the pressure to introduce expressive skills may be irresistible. In this case, the specific-purpose goals, like the touristic or other "survival"-oriented goals, may conflict, at least in the short term, with a goal of native-like communicative proficiency.

For the remainder of this paper, however, I will discuss the methods and theoretical basis for language instruction exclusively in the context of the most widely stated instrumental goal. That is, I will assume that the "why" of language instruction is usually best answered as "to achieve a full and native-like range of instrumental language skills." To the extent that this is not the goal, the rest of what I have to say may have little bearing on the "how" of language instruction. For present discussion, then, I will assume

that the acquirer is one who wishes to achieve native fluency in the language and that both the teacher and the acquirer are willing to focus upon this goal to the exclusion of such competing goals as the learning of conscious grammatical knowledge and the early emergence of production skills.

Comprehension versus Production in Language Teaching

A growing and diverse body of empirical research indicates that the best way to acquire a language is to acquire the skills needed to comprehend it fluently, and that everything else will follow, if not automatically, at least far more easily and effectively. Early suggestions for an emphasis on comprehension training date back to the 1950s and 1960s (Asher, 1969; Belasco, 1967; Scherer, 1950, 1952), but it was not until the 1970s that a full-fledged "comprehension approach" to language instruction emerged (Burling, 1978; Davies, 1976; Postovsky, 1974; Winitz & Reeds, 1973, 1975). In the 1980s this approach has come to occupy a prominent position in the field (Burling, 1982; Davies, 1980; Gary & Gary, 1980, 1981; Krashen, 1981a; Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Nord, 1980; Terrell, 1982; Winitz, 1981).

Characteristics of the Comprehension Approach

A prime characteristic of the comprehension approach is that it omits grammar: it avoids the teaching of explicit linguistic knowledge (Krashen, 1982a). Conscious attentiveness to the form of one's own productions or of the productions of others gets in the way of fluent communicative exchange. Burling (1982) even goes so far as to say that the conscious precepts of "grammatical usage" are not useful in the process of recognizing and correcting errors: the most effective "monitor" is not conscious grammatical rule-following but rather the intuitive trial-and-error process of arriving at an appropriate utterance after noticing that something one has said or is about to say doesn't "sound right."

Similarly, the best language acquisition situation is one that recreates the supportive and relaxed atmosphere of the native language acquirer. Anything that might serve to annoy or distract the acquirer is to be avoided. Without any doubt, the greatest source of tension and preoccupation for language acquirers is the frustration and fatigue produced by their forced attempts to express themselves in a new language. Most acquirers, however, accept their teachers' admonition that this discomfort and effort are

unavoidable components of the language acquisition process. Happily, advocates of the comprehension approach have concluded that the best language instruction method is one in which acquirers are not required to speak or otherwise produce in the language being acquired.

The best method of teaching a language, then, focuses solely on the development of comprehension skills, including both listening and reading. Acquirers are required to show their developing comprehension ability in any of a number of ways, both non-verbally and in their native language, but they are not required or even especially encouraged to try to speak or write in the language being acquired. And whenever the acquirer does produce utterances in the new language, the teacher is to engage in no error-correction. Instead, the teacher is to ensure that the acquirer receives comprehensible and well-formed input, regardless of the well-formedness of the acquirer's output (Krashen, 1981a).

Harris Winitz has provided a useful brief description of the key methods associated with the comprehension approach, minus the affective, motivational factors which have more to do with the setting and the background characteristics of the acquirers than with the design of instructional materials (Winitz, 1981, p. xiii):

> Listening comprehension is stressed. Students are given an opportunity to acquire the grammar of a second language by acquiring a fundamental understanding of the language. Initially the student hears sentences in the second language for which the meaning is clearly indicated through actions or pictures. All sentences are spoken by native speakers. Lexical items and grammatical units are carefully programmed to maximize implicit learning. The umbrella term for this instructional system is the comprehension approach. It differs significantly from other methods in the value placed on speaking exercises. Production drills and preplanned dialogues or artificially generated conversations are not used. Conversation is not discouraged. It simply is not taught. The belief is held that conversational fluency will develop as the result of learning to understand a language.

Pattern drills and pronunciation practice are replaced by a seemingly super-permissive acceptance of any output whatever, as long as it is intelligible in any way to the teacher, no matter how generous the teacher has to be. In fact, the main thing appears to be to keep the acquirer actively and communicatively involved in the teaching situation.

The instructional experiments so far (see Burline, 1982; and Winitz, 1981) have shown that the success of the comprehension approach is not entirely uniform. Instead, it seems that such success is directly proportional to the experimenter's success in devising instructional materials that are (1) not beyond the interpretive capacity of the acquirers but are at the same time (2) of compelling interest to them.

On the first point, Heidi Dulay, Marina Burt, and Stephen Krashen (1982) note that "The specification of principles governing learning complexity is probably one of the most important areas of theoretical research that remains to be undertaken" (p. 58). Despite this continuing uncertainty as to exactly what the best order of presentation is, experimenters have devised any number of ways to increase the degree of difficulty of presented material in a graded manner. These have ranged from merely intuitive simplification of the teacher's speech in the classroom and in prepared materials to the ordered introduction of specific complexities of grammar and vocabulary (as gauged by order of mastery in child or adult language acquisition, see Dulay, et al., 1982) to the actual mixing of vocabulary and structures from the language being taught and a language already known to the acquirers (see Burling, 1978). The crucial issue seems to be simply that the acquirers' ongoing comprehension be sufficient to allow them to get the gist of what is being said so that their attention will be maintained. Krashen, for one, has now (personal communication) abandoned the idea that the order of presentation of material should be guided by any notions of structural complexity.

Turning, then, to the second point--the maximization of communicative involvement--experiments have been especially creative. The "Total Physical Response" method of James Asher (1977), for example, begins with the acting out of simple commands by acquirers from the very first day of class, with increasing complexity of non-verbal response thereafter. The late Valerian Postovsky (1981) recommended the "synchronized presentation of language material and pictorial events" (p. 176) followed by a multiple-choice selection among an array of pictures on the basis of a recorded utterance. Another way to capture acquirer interest is to present information relevant to the solution of simple problems exclusively in the language being acquired: problem-solving will thus be dependent upon accurate comprehension (see Winitz

& Reeds, 1975). A final and even more general strategy for the teacher to employ in selecting and ordering material for presentation is to present topics that make direct reference to issues in which the acquirers have a real personal interest or significant background knowledge (see various authors represented in Blair, 1983).

The empirical evidence for the effectiveness of the comprehension approach as described above is presented and discussed in the works I have cited. I will not rehearse it here. Nor will I discuss the issue of when, how, and why to introduce production tasks, though I am prepared to suggest that some memorized phrases could be introduced at an early point to serve as models for acquirers to refer to when they choose to begin speaking (cf., Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Instead, I would like to turn now to the final point of this paper: why should it be that an approach that avoids explicit instruction in production skills manages to foster both production and comprehension skills?

Explaining the Success of the Comprehension Approach

Advocates of the comprehension approach offer a large number of explanations for the success of their approach. The simplest of these is that it is easier to teach acquirers to understand spoken and written language than it is to teach them to produce it. Acquirers thus acquire a greater amount of functional skill after a given amount of time and effort spent in acquiring comprehension skills than they acquire after that same amount of "mixed" training (see Scherer, 1952). This explanation from effectiveness is sometimes further defended on the grounds that the motivational and motor-coordination obstacles to speaking are too great to overcome in the early phases of language acquisition (Dulay, et al., 1982, p. 4). The success of the comprehension approach is, by this explanation, simply a result of the dangers of early production training. No mention is made of the rather mysterious fact that production skills appear to be developed in the comprehension approach. Failure to mention this leaves the approach open to the objection that if comprehension skills are so easy to acquire, perhaps what is most needed is to overcome the motivational and motor-coordination obstacles to speaking so that acquirers will speak as well as they understand.

One of the more theoretical explanations advanced in favor of the comprehension approach is neuroanatomical, and it takes two basic forms.

First, it is noted that early production training may result from the activation of a mimicry routine involving uncomprehending repetition of input via the direct activation of the motor speech area from the lowest level of receptive processing in the auditory cortex. That is, early (as well as later) speech output may be produced on the basis of less than adequate understanding of what is being produced (Diller, 1981). Early production training may result in good parroting instead of natural fluent output. Second, it is noted that comprehension skills may be represented in both the left and the right hemispheres of the cortex rather than in only the left hemisphere. This would mean that acquisition might take place faster, and perhaps with a greater involvement of the entire psyche of the acquirer, if instructon emphasized the bilaterally represented comprehension skills (Asher, 1981). Again, however, these neuroanatomical explanations fail to address the issue of how it is that production skills are developed via the comprehension approach.

Other explanations are more theoretical still. Putting comprehension first in instruction is seen to follow the "natural" example of first-language acquisition: children acquire comprehension skills before they acquire production skills (Asher, 1972). This primacy of comprehension is also seen to follow from the "logical" priority of comprehension: intelligible output is, for the most part, modelled in some way or other on some aspect of comprehended input; neologisms are neither prevalent nor long-lived. Yet again, of course, these explanations do not touch the question of why no explicit training in production is required or advisable.

I have no quarrel with any of the above explanations of the effectiveness of the comprehension approach. In fact, I am willing to believe that they all contribute to our developing theory of the nature of language and its acquisition. None of them, however, attempts to explain the production-developing aspects of the comprehension approach.

Remember that it is these aspects that teachers and acquirers are most likely to be concerned about. They believe that to acquire a language is to speak it. They consequently believe that one must from the very beginning concentrate heavily on how to produce the language. And they believe that for this purpose the mastery of conscious grammatical rules is essential. In the

absence of any rationale for abandoning these two precepts, they are unlikely to be persuaded by merely empirical evidence, about which they have every right to be skeptical (especially given the dismal history of such allegedly empirical demonstrations in the area of applied linguistics). And Burling's (1982) remarks about the ability to correct one's output merely by trial-and-error, listening for the trial that "sounds right," seems hopelessly optimistic in the absence of a reason to believe that the acquirer will also have a basis for making appropriate corrections. Let's look now at the only reason anyone has thus far advanced for this phenomenomon.

Judith Olmsted Gary and Norman Gary (1981) have presented perhaps the most detailed theoretical rationale for "a much greater emphasis on listening comprehension in foreign language instruction." The reasons they offer for the production-developing effects of comprehension training are clearer than any others I have found (Gary & Gary, 1981, p. 2-3):

> The major differences between the encoding and decoding tasks--aside from the motor movements required for speech or writing--have to do with processing: information retrieval, short and long-term memory processes, control of speech of processing, etc. Also there are different strategies required in processing for comprehension and production. In production the speaker controls the structures and vocabulary used; thus a foreign language learner can use various paraphrastic devices when he is producing language, avoiding problematic lexical and grammatical structures. But when he is comprehending, he does not have this control; he must deal with an essentially open grammatical and lexical system. (Ingram, Nord, & Dragt, 1975)

Ironically, the observation that speakers can limit the processing difficulty of their output while listeners cannot similarly limit the processing difficulty of input appears to argue <u>against</u> the claim that listening is "easier" then speaking. This contradiction is lessened somewhat by the following observation (Gary & Gary, 1981, p. 3):

> . . . Speech requires linguistically more complex tasks than comprehension. Comprehension--at least at all but the most advanced levels--allows many linguistic signals to be ignored: redundant grammatical and semantic functions such as concord, definite/indefinite distinctions, singular/plural distinctions, etc., can very often be ignored without seriously distorting the message being comprehended.

The Gary's defense of the primacy of comprehension in language instruction is thus based on a recognition of the practical difficulties faced by speakers, plus some recognition of deeper processing differences between the various language tasks. This is no more than an encapsulation of the observations already presented in the present paper, with which I have no disagreement.

What I do find troubling is their explanation of the rapid and unforced emergence of production skills in later stages of language acquisition even when the instruction gives these skills no attention. In attempting to account for this phenomenon, they fall back on the now-standard notion of a language competence that is processually neutral (Gary & Gary, 1981, p. 2-3):

> In terms of linguistic competence, listening and speaking require the same kind of language knowledge, not two different kinds. The same set of rules is used in language comprehension as in language production. . . . Since the same set of rules underlies both speaking and listening, any instructional methodology which teaches the system will of necessity have effects on the total language competence.

Unfortunately, there is no empirical evidence to support the claim that language knowledge exists separately from knowledge of how, on the one hand, to process language input and how, on the other hand, to produce language output. In fact, there is no theory of such performance-neutral knowledge that can be used to test the claim that it can be <u>used</u>, even by an "ideal" listener-speaker, to accomplish anything whatsoever. Models of competence, and the theories from which they derive, are nothing more than abstract mathematical formalisms that are, at best, only heuristically valuable to those who are seeking to develop a theory of language knowledge (see Matthews, 1979).

Fortunately, there is an alternative to this failed line of explanation, and the Garys themselves have provided an entry into it in their observation that comprehension processing can often be successful even when many cues are ignored. In a very real sense, the current widespread emphasis on early production and on the manipulation of forms by means of consciously known linguistic rules encourages acquirers to produce utterances that exceed their own ability to comprehend: they literally don't know what they're saying.

What the Garys fail to realize is that the shortcuts to understanding that are evident in early comprehension ability provide strong reasons for developing very advanced comprehension skills before one starts producing output. Otherwise one is forced to create and manipulate language units in production before those units are needed in comprehension. Pursuit of this line of reasoning provides a very strong theoretical explanation for the success of the comprehension approach.

A Theory of Language and of Language Acquisition

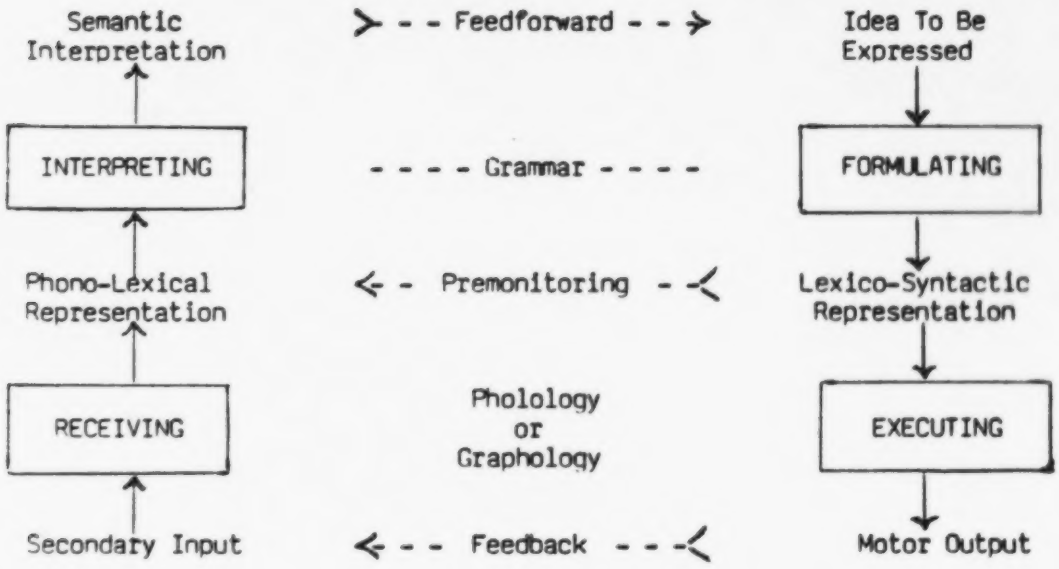
The accompanying diagram is a model of the various components of language ability and how they interact with each other. This model finds no place for any sort of processing-neutral language knowledge. The labels Phonology and Grammar that appear in the diagram, then, do not refer to the usual sort of abstract rules posited by linguists. Instead, they label the pairs of components relating to the physical bases of speech (Phonology) versus the higher-order perceptual and cognitive processes that analyze language input and organize language output regardless of the physical channel being employed (Grammar).

In a similar manner, Graphology appears as an optional replacement for Phonology in order to have the diagram account also for reading and writing. If this were done, all the other labels could remain as they are, but--by implication--the Sensory Input would be visual (instead of auditory) and the Motor Output would be manual (instead of articulatory), and concomitant changes would be implied for the nature of the RECEIVING and EXECUTING processing components and also in some aspects of the higher-order levels of representation and processing (because spoken and written language are also grammatically distinct in various ways). In any case, though, the absolute separation of comprehension and production processes is retained.

On the other hand, these processes, however separate they are, do interact. At the lowest level, the motor output of the language producer typically results in sensory input to that same person as self-perceiver. This kind of reflexive processing is labelled "feedback" in the diagram. Higher up, but still at a rather concrete level of representation, where words and phrases are consciously available, language users are, of course, able to engage in anticipatory self-comprehension of language structures not yet

executed as motor output. This internal feedback processing is labelled Premonitoring.

Language Processes and Their Interaction



Above the level of what is called Phono-Lexical and Lexico-Syntactic Representation are the processing components labelled INTERPRETING and FORMULATING. The output from the first and input to the second of these components are called Semantic Interpretation and Idea To Be Expressed, respectively. These, unlike the two forms of "Representation" are decidedly non-conscious. Listeners are aware of the words (the Phono-Lexical Representation) that someone has said, but they have no direct awareness of their meaning; instead, they are aware of verbal and other conscious representations that that representation evokes via Feedforward and other cognitive processes. Conversely, speakers may be aware of the superficial form (that is, the Lexico-Syntactic Representation) of what they are about to say, and they may be aware of a large number of different sorts of non-verbal impressions that may sometimes be related to what they are about to say, but they are not directly aware of the meaning of it any more than they are of the meaning of what someone else says. The process of premonitoring is thus a

process of discovery, and even at that the only thing that is discovered is that what one is about to say leads one to think of saying other things, such as "No, that doesn't say what I mean," or "Yes, I did say that well." (See Straight, 1978, for a fuller discussion of the role of consciousness in all of this.)

I will not elaborate upon this model of language processes here. Instead, I will show briefly how the model meshes with the evidence for the primacy of comprehension skills in language acquisition.

Notice first that according to the model Premonitoring and Feedback are simply reflexive channels for the internal processing of formulated or executed structures. What you are thinking of saying serves as input directly into the INTERPRETING mechanism, and what you have already said serves as input directly into the RECEIVING mechanism. There is considerable evidence from studies of flawed auditory feedback and dysphasic symptoms that this kind of internal processing is essential to the production of well-formed language structures (see Straight, 1976, for expansion of these observations). When people, for whatever reason, are prevented from hearing their speech output in the usual manner, that output becomes phonetically distorted. Similarly, when a brain-damaged patient exhibits an inability to comprehend language input, that patient's language output shows considerable semantic distortion, even though it may be phonetically fluent (e.g., Kertesz, 1982).

Accurate production of language output, whether actual or merely anticipated thus depends crucially on properly functioning feedback and premonitoring mechanisms. The correct functioning of these mechanisms depends in turn upon the presence and correct functioning of comprehension mechanisms, whether those that apply to sensory input (RECEIVING) or those that apply to recognized phono-lexical phrases (INTERPRETING). It follows automatically that production abilities develop most accurately and fully only after comprehension abilities are well established. The model of language processes presented here thus argues strongly for putting comprehension ahead of production in language instruction.

But why is specific training in production not necessary in order for language acquirers to develop their production skills? The solution to this puzzle may, I believe, come from a careful consideration of the role of

Feedforward. Feedforward is the series of processes that are applied to the results of interpretive processing to arrive at the various associations, implications, and possible supportive or conflicting reponses that might be given to those interpretations. It is also the basis for the anticipation of what a speaker is going to say next that plays such an important role in fluent comprehension (see Straight, 1982).

James Nord (1981) has provided perhaps the best previous discussion of the role of Feedforward in language acquisition. Acquirers, he observes, go through an "Anticipatory Feed Forward Phase" in the development of listening fluency. His description of the techniques that have been found useful in developing such anticipatory skills includes one (described in Landis, 1978, and Mackey, 1971) that is particularly intersting (pp. 90-91):

> The teacher speaks only in the target language, but the student can speak in whichever language he or she feels comfortable. . . . If the teacher is a native or near native speaker of French, students will always be hearing native French. They will not be spending half of the classtime listening to the poor pronunciation and grammatical misconceptions of their classmates, which is usually the case in classes in which speaking the target language is emphasized. This type of bilingual conversation can also be used with language tutors who have a poor speaking ability in English. If the tutors can comprehend enough English to maintain discussion, they can carry on a bilingual conversation. This way both the student and the tutor can increase their listening fluency in the new language while speaking in their own native tongue. It makes it easier on both parties, it develops the language competence through listening, and it is more interesting to both tutor and student because they can express themselves much better in their own tongue. Most importantly, they can discuss topics they are interested in, control the conversation more, and thus anticipate responses from other speakers.

What this means is that until such time as one has acquired relatively accurate and complete abilities to arrive at Semantic Interpretations of the Sensory Input one is receiving, it will not be possible even to come up with appropriate Ideas To Be Expressed, not even in one's first language, to say nothing of a language one is just beginning to acquire. However, once one does begin to have such ideas, the possibility for FORMULATING language (and other) responses emerges naturally in the course of anticipating other speakers' utterances in ongoing listening. At that point, the attempts one makes to begin creating comprehensible Motor Output occur in a fully informed and self-monitored manner, without artificial, meaningless parroting.

Furthermore, because the processes of RECEIVING and INTERPRETING are being corrected through constant implicit testing of comprehension, the acquirer's output requires no special intervention on the part of the teacher other than to respond as a normal participant in communicative interaction with the acquirer who is trying to speak. Following Nord (1981) again, it appears that if acquirers are allowed to develop their comprehension fluency first, instead of developing bad habits through premature attempts to produce, they will naturally reach a "Discrepancy Feedback Phase" in which they "can detect discrepancies and errors because they sound wrong" (p. 93). This is, of course, simply another way of describing what Burling (1982) calls "sounding right." Nord concludes that under such circumstances "speaking skills should come very rapidly without specific speaking instruction because the trained listening ear serves as a self-monitor" (p. 98). Overt correction is unnecessary: between the acquirer's own self-monitoring and the evidence of failed production that is implicit in the teacher's (or other listener's) misunderstanding or incomprehension, the acquirer needs nothing more to develop production abilities.

Full productive language ability develops therefore as a virtually automatic by-product of the development of fluent comprehension processes through exposure to high-quality input presented in comprehensible contexts. The paradox engendered by the success of the comprehension approach to language instruction disappears in a theory of language processes that makes a clear separation among the components that constitute language ability while emphasizing the ways in which these components interact in the ongoing comprehension, production, and acquisition of language.

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NOTE

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